Anti-Oppressive Education: Addressing Power and Inequality through Syllabi Redesign

Art of Teaching Seminar Series
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Presenter Introduction

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Agenda

1) Syllabi purposes
2) Considerations for redesign
3) Areas for consideration
   a) Language & tone
   b) Power dynamics
   c) Learning styles
4) Lessons learned
5) Student reflections
6) Discussion
Syllabi Purpose

❖ Course overview
❖ Learning outcomes
❖ Course schedule
❖ Assignment criteria
❖ Policies and expectations
Considerations for Redesign

❖ Changing student population
❖ Promoting equity and accessibility
❖ Fostering inclusivity
❖ Real-world relevance
❖ Critical thinking and empathy

College be like
You: Hey professor how you doing today?
Professor: It's on the syllabus
Areas for Consideration

1. Language & Tone
2. Power Dynamics
3. Learning Styles

TEACHER: DID YOU READ THE SYLLABUS?
ME: NO BECAUSE ITS BORING
Language & Tone

★ Encouraging language
★ Non-punitive
★ Flexibility without negating accountability
★ Reevaluate standards of professionalism

Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve @nvancleve

I literally built into my syllabus some "rest and health" assignments for my students. NO professor ever told me that taking care of myself was part of my success and well-being. SO...I plan to teach that this first semester @BrownUniversity
Example

ORIGINAL:
Assignments are due at the start of class, as outlined by the course schedule date. Late submissions will receive a 10% deduction per day. Assignments are not accepted after 7 days.

REDESIGNED W/STUDENTS:
Submission Deadline: Assignments must be submitted by the beginning of class as indicated on the syllabus. A 24-hour grace period is granted for submission without any specific cause or request. Students needing an extension beyond this grace period should email the professor before the original due date to discuss a new submission deadline.

Late Submissions: Assignments submitted after the grace period, and without a prior arranged extension, are still encouraged to be submitted and are eligible to earn up to 50% of the assignment points. Assignments are not accepted after 7 days.
Power Dynamics

★ Co-creating course expectations
  ○ Due dates, deadlines, extensions

★ Be aware of power imbalances
  ○ Create approachable opportunities

★ Create connections
  ○ Let students get to know you
  ○ Lead by example
Example

ORIGINAL: Office Hours: Fridays 8am-10am

REDESIGNED: Student Hours: Tuesdays 2-4pm(zoom); Wednesdays 12-2(in-office or zoom) or by appointment

Each week, I set aside time to be available to students. We can meet via zoom or in person to discuss questions about course content, grades, absences, participation, etc. The link is provided on the Zoom Tab in Canvas connect via zoom. To connect in person, stop by my office.
Example

**ORIGINAL:**
As described by the Office of the Dean of Students - Illinois law requires the University to *reasonably accommodate* its students' religious beliefs, observances, and practices in regard to admissions, class attendance, and the scheduling of examinations and work requirements...

**REDESIGNED:**
I welcome students of diverse religious backgrounds into my classroom as part of my larger commitment to inclusive educational practices. I also know that when students are able to bring all of themselves into the classroom, everyone benefits from the diversity of perspectives and backgrounds present, resulting in more robust scholarly engagement. Additionally, under Illinois law...
Learning Styles

★ Consider a variety of learning styles
  ○ Ask students what active learning looks like to them
  ○ Review assignments for alternatives or more options

★ Explore grading Schemas
  ○ Diversify types of grading opportunities
  ○ Consider holistic grading
Example in Co-creating

ORIGINAL:

Attendance & Participation Policy: Attendance is required. Each excused absence results in a 5-point deduction from the student’s final score. Each unexcused absence will result in a 10-point deduction from the student’s final score. To make up 5 points, submit a half-page summary of the class topics.
Co-Created Attendance Policy

**REDESIGNED:**

Students will work to communicate with the professor in advance (barring any extenuating circumstances) when they are unable to attend class in person or via zoom.

Students are responsible for makeup work, class materials, notes, missed activities or assignments. If the student has more than 3 excused absences, the course grade will be reduced by one letter grade. Unexcused absences will be a reduction of 5 points and are not eligible to make up in-class activities.
Assignment Variability

Questions to consider:

★ Is there an audio option for the paper/assignment?
★ Can we create flexibility in the assignment, without changing the core intentions?
★ Is there diversity of types of assignments to showcase different strengths
Lessons Learned

It’s a balance
• Different power/privilege
• Different wants and needs

Language does matter
• Clarity
• It’s still a contract
• Accountability
• Right to modify

One size doesn’t fit all:
▪ Class size & format
▪ Grade level
▪ University policy

Shift in student relationships
• Less anxiety & fear
• Increased trust and rapport
• Peer accountability

More time and capacity
• Less, “its in the syllabus”
• Less tracking down students
• Less enforcement

Increased accountability
• Better attendance & participation
• Proactive communication
• Solutions focused
Student Reflections

“I feel more invested in the class itself. It also allows me to align my learning expectations with that of the class.”

“We're being treated like the adults that we are instead of existing in an arbitrary and unhealthy power dynamic with our professors.”

“It says nobody is better than or more important than anyone else, we all have value here.”

“We discovered that we had input and choices, so we co-created a class covenant that had us holding ourselves and her to an agreed-upon rigorous standard of work, professionalism, and communication. It was weird at first, but so empowering.”

“Getting the opportunity to help influence our class climate together as a group made time spent in class feel safe, and productive.”
Final Thoughts

➢ It’s a process!

➢ Consider:
  ➢ What areas of your syllabus do you have discretion?
  ➢ What is an immediate change you can make?
  ➢ Can you collaborate with anyone to share revisions?
Resources

Box Folder Link:
https://uofi.box.com/s/t9u8j9n82fgmfj3vxmssl5rkjzrz7v3q
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